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APPRENTICESHIP UNDER THE ENGLISH GILD SYSTEM

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If history is to be used effectively to shed light upon present problems it must be used guardedly; for the exact conditions of the past are never reproduced in the present. Many a problem of bygone ages has reappeared in modern times, but with so different a setting that the solution attained in the past may be ineffective today. So in the case of the problem of industrial education, which has become so prominent since the disappearance of the American frontier, it must not be forgotten by those who propose a revival of the apprenticeship system that times have changed and that apprenticeship, as it existed in England from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century, would be utterly out of place in the majority of occupations today. On the other hand the system was, in its time, a success; for no institution could have lasted as long as this did unless it had met certain vital social needs. It accomplished certain results for the individual and for society which we expect the industrial training of today to accomplish. A study of certain of its phases may, then, be of some use.

The success of the apprenticeship system during the Middle Ages and the period of the Renaissance was largely due to two factors: First, the close personal relationship and identity of interest existing between master and apprentice; and second, the supervision of master and apprentice by the craft gilds. These factors were fostered by the social and economic conditions of the Middle Ages, but passed away under the changed economy of modern times. To the loss of the proper personal relationship and identity of interest existing between master and apprentice and to the lack of adequate supervision over this relationship is partially due the decay of the apprenticeship system.

As Sombart points out, one can only understand the relation

of the master to his "Hilfspersonen" by remembering that all handicrafts had their origin in family life. Journeymen and apprentices entered completely into the family circle and in the common activity found a bond of union.¹ The reciprocal duties of master and apprentice are set forth in a general way in the indentures—articles of agreement at the time of binding—many of which are preserved in ancient records.² These indentures show that the chief duty of the apprentice was to serve his master faithfully, not only in his master's business, but in the performance of household tasks or other services; the master was obliged to teach the lad his trade, to house, feed, and clothe him. More than this, he was supposed to give the youth such moral and religious training as a boy of immature years would naturally require.³ In a word it was the master's duty to prepare the boy to be not merely a good craftsman but a good citizen as well.⁴ Finally the closeness of the personal relationship between the two is clearly brought out by the fact that not rarely the apprentice led his master's daughter a blushing bride to the altar.⁵

The apprenticeship system, as it existed in mediaeval times, offered opportunity to the apprentice of learning all branches of his trade. The shop was small; master and apprentice often worked side by side at the same bench. The master himself worked at all processes of his handicraft, and therefore it was comparatively easy for him to teach all processes to the lad at his side. It was comparatively easy, too, for the lad to follow all the

¹ Sombart, *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, I, 118; *vide also* Strype's ed. of Stow's *Survey of London*, II, 331.

² Bateson, *Leicester*, III, 50; Cunningham, *Growth of English Industry and Commerce, Early and Middle Ages*, pp. 349-50; Noble, *Ironmongers*, pp. 44-45; Clode, *Early History of the Merchant Taylors*, I, 344; Hibbert, *English Gilds*, pp. 52-53; Madox, *Formulare Anglicanum*, No. clxxviii; Bird, *Law Selections*, pp. 76 ff; Ashley, *Economic History and Theory*, II, 86, refers to a number of others.

³ An ordinance of the Shoemaker's Gild of Carlisle provides that no master shall allow his apprentice to play cards in the master's house (Ferguson and Nanson, *Gilds of Carlisle*, p. 179). Some gilds required masters to see that apprentices went to church (Welch, *Pewterers*, I, 223; *Clothworkers' Ordinances*, pp. 133, 134; *vide also* Cunningham, "Growth of English Industry," etc., *Modern Times*, Part II, 629-30).

⁴ "London 'Prentices," *Colburn Magazine*, V, 174, quoted from the *Cities' Advocate*, printed 1629; Strype's ed. of Stow's *Survey of London*, II, 331.

⁵ *Ibid.*

workings of his master and to imitate them. The number of apprentices being small the master could give each one a large part of his attention. Furthermore, as there were but few apprentices¹ and journeymen, there was but little division of labor and therefore but little of the modern tendency to keep a boy employed on one or two processes to the exclusion of all others. It was to the interest of the master that the apprentice be able to assist him at every process of the craft. To the master, too, accrued the profits of the apprentice's toil during the latter's term of service,² and the more skilful the boy, the greater the profits of his employer.

In the same way the apprenticeship system favored the development of artistic ability. The long term of service, usually seven years in England, somewhat less on the Continent,³ gave opportunity for the acquirement of that refinement of skill so necessary to the true artist. The careful, individual attention given by the right sort of master to the apprentice enabled the latter to avoid superficiality, while the master's own work furnished a worthy example for the lad's imitative powers. Then, too, since whatever the apprentice earned went to his master, the young man was forced to find his rewards, not in immediate pecuniary gain, which might tempt him to quick, superficial work, but in his master's praise and in the joy of artistic creation. Finally the fact that he was one day to be a master himself would naturally lead the apprentice to a desire to acquire a knowledge of all processes of his craft and to a dexterity of hand and artistic skill in construction. In general, then, the interests of master and apprentice in the

¹ From the fifteenth century onward, however, the English gilds had frequently to forbid masters to take more than two, three, or four apprentices. This prohibition the wealthier masters resented and came more and more to disregard. Harris, *Coventry Leet Book*, I, 92; Smith, T., *English Gilds*, pp. 315, 316; Wadmore, *Skinner's*, p. 26; Young, *Barber-Surgeons*, p. 64; Lambert, J. M., *Two Thousand Years of Gild Life*, p. 206; Welch, *Pewterers*, I, iii; *ibid.*, pp. 185, 237-38; Smith, Adam, *Wealth of Nations* (Cannan ed.) I, 121, etc.

² "Whatever the Apprentice gets of his own labour, or of his Master's Occupation or Stock, he getteth to him whose apprentice he is."—Strype's ed. of Stow's *Survey of London*, II, 434.

³ Brentano, *History of Gilds*, p. cxxix. While the period of apprenticeship was shorter on the Continent than in England, the period of journeyman service was longer. This period of journeymanship fostered the development of artistic skill.

days of handicraft were identical. Apart from the matter of personal attachment between the two, it was to the economic interest of each that the apprentice should become a skilled, artistic master-craftsman.

The results of the apprenticeship system are to be found in the artistic handicraft work of the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance. While it may be true, as Sombart says, that the finest productions are the work of artists who chose to express themselves through the crafts, rather than the work of skilled artisans,¹ yet there are proofs that there were many artisans of high artistic ability. Sombart shows that it is unsafe to judge the craftsmanship of the Renaissance by the treasures of our "Arts and Crafts" museums, treasures which possess unusual artistic merit and which he holds to be the work of artists. On the other hand there are certain relics in these museums which are preserved, not for their artistic value, but for their historic or antiquarian worth, as interesting witnesses to a bygone age. A suit of armor, for example, would find a niche in the museum whether it possessed artistic merit or not. Yet if one takes into consideration the lack of machinery in mediaeval times it must be admitted that even the average suit of armor is a work of art. And it is the work of an armorer—an artisan—not an artist who chose to express himself through the medium of armor-manufacture.

As further proof of the artistic instinct and power of the mediæval craftsman take some of the exquisite details in the cathedrals. The carvings on the pews or the walls, the wonderful ironwork and other details indicate the skilled hand and aesthetic feeling of the craftsman. So numerous are these details that it is impossible to think of them as the work of artists rather than of artisans. It is hardly possible that the obscene carvings so often tucked away in odd corners or cornices—carvings so incongruous with the majestic spiritual ideal dominating the great structure—were planned by

¹ "Die Renaissancezeit hat ein so herrliches Kunstgewerbe nicht deshalb besessen, weil die Handwerker Künstler, sondern weil die Künstler Handwerker waren, richtiger." *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, I, 85. Sombart's estimate of the artistic ability of the average craftsman is, I think, too low. *Vide* his discussion of this in I, 85, and compare with the evidence presented above.

the architect; they are far more likely to be the expression of the coarse but artistic sense of humor of some long-forgotten artisan.

Jacquemart tells us that the artisans known as joiners developed the handicraft of making and decorating furniture in a wonderful manner. They approached the sculptors in artistic power.¹ It is not necessary to multiply examples. Enough has been said to show that dexterity of hand and power of artistic expression were widespread in the days when the apprenticeship system flourished.

The efficiency of the apprenticeship system was guarded by gild supervision. It may be objected that I have praised the mediaeval apprenticeship system too highly, that I have represented an ideal condition of affairs. It may be pointed out that masters sometimes ill treated their apprentices, neglected them, and failed to instruct them properly, and that apprentices were sometimes idle, thievish, and faithless. All this is true, even of the mediaeval system, though most of the examples of such bad conduct come from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In mediaeval times the danger of such bad consequences was lessened by the fact that both master and apprentice were responsible to the gild. The gilds passed many ordinances to regulate the conduct of master and apprentice,² and these ordinances were enforced in the gild courts.³ Such supervision over conduct was far more

¹ *History of Furniture*, p. 22.

² Vide in this connection Welch, *Pewterers*, I, 4; Riley, *Memorials of London Life*, pp. 243, 247; Herbert, *London Livery Companies*, I, 13; Harris, *Coventry Leet Book*, Part III, 671; Young, *Barber-Surgeons*, p. 181, etc.

³ "The authority of the craft, even after it had altogether fallen into the hands of its wealthier members, continued to be used for the protection alike of apprentices and of journeymen against the violence of their employers."—Ashley, *Economic History and Theory*, II, 106.

The following case arose in the court of the Pewterers' Company of London in 1559. "At the same Courte John Smythe Sometyme apprentice with Geffery Mathewe was commytted to warde by the Mr [master of the company] wardens and assystance for that he had promysed to serve a certayne tyme with John Cutler as maye apeare the last yeare and after his promys within ii days after went to maydstone and wrought with a Tynkerd and made hym mowlds."—Welch, *Pewterers*, I, 207.

Clode, C. M., *Early History of Merchant Taylors*, I, 209: "Apprentices were under the care of the Company, and masters were fined for ill treatment. . . . In the case of misusing an apprentice an entry of April 2d, 1563, shows that very sum-

effective when the towns were small and the actions of the gild members open to close scrutiny than when the towns had grown to cities and less was known of the private life of master and apprentice.

The supervision of the gild was not confined to observation and control of conduct but was extended to the actual work of instruction as well. Sometimes the gilds specified what the master should teach. Thus the Clockmakers of London in 1632 provided that every person of their trade should "teach and instruct his said Apprentice and Apprentices in such manner and form as their Predecessors have done, which is to keep daily him and them in his House, and there by himself or his sufficient Journeyman, teach or instruct them in the making of Cases or Boxes of Silver or Brass, and likewise the several Springs belonging to a Watch, Clock or Larum, and likewise all other particular and peculiar things belonging to such Watches, Clocks, Larums, Mathematical Instruments, and Sun-Dials his or their Master shall teach and instruct them in."¹ The Apothecaries and the Barber-Surgeons of London made rather elaborate provision for the matters to be taught their apprentices,² but as a rule it was not necessary for the gilds to specify the subject-matter, as the masters knew perfectly well what was expected of them.

While the gilds did not usually specify what was to be taught they did take measures to see that the teaching was properly done. They did not intend to allow apprenticeship to become a farce nor

mary measures were taken against his master, thus, 'The Wardens have comyted Thomas Palmer to prysone for that he hath broken Henry Bourefelde his apprentice's hedd without any just cause. Henry Bourfeld by composition had comytted his two apprentices to serve with Thomas Palmer during and for so long time and such consideration as they were agreed. And for that the said Thomas Palmer hath not only evill used himself towards the said apprentices, but also for that they have not had of hym sufficient meate and drynke as they ought to have had' " (p. 209).

"Jan. 12, 1571, in case where cassock had been made too small, Master and Wardens ordered that defendant pay the plaintiff forty shillings 'and shall take to hym self the said garment to make his best pffit accordingly' " (*ibid.*, p. 210; from records of the company).

¹ Atkins, *Clockmakers*, p. 44.

² Barrett, *History of the Apothecaries of London*, p. xxxiii; *ibid.*, pp. 197-98; Young, *Barber-Surgeons*, pp. 309-10.

to permit the apprentice to become a master at the end of seven years whether or not he was a skilled craftsman. One of the objects of the gilds was the maintenance of a high standard of production and for this they were responsible to the community.¹ In at least one case, that of the Cappers of Coventry, it was a duty of the principal master of the craft to go round the city annually, examining every apprentice to see that he was receiving proper instruction from his master.

Practically all the gilds insisted on some sort of an examination of the apprentice at the end of his term.² At first the examination merely took the form of a requirement that the master or other "able men" testify to the fitness of the apprentice to "occupy" his craft.³ Later on, however, the gilds insisted that the apprentice be examined by the masters or chief officers of the company and proved "sufficient and able to occupie."⁴ Thus the Clothworkers of London insisted that the candidate for mastership "shear and worke" in the Common Hall of the gild before the Master, Wardens, and certain of the assistants.⁵ The Shoemakers' Gild of Carlisle required that the apprentice, after completing his term "have foure paire of shoes given him to worke"; if the shoes were well wrought he was to be admitted a journeyman, but if not he

¹ Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 17.

² Bickley, *Little Red Book of Bristol*, II, 96; "Ordinances of the Skinners," 1408; *ibid.*, p. 104, "Ordinances of the Cordwainers"; *Hist. MSS. Comm., Twelfth Report*, IX, 521, "Ordinances of the Butchers of Gloucester," 1454; *ibid.*, *Fourteenth Report*, VIII, 135, "Ordinances of the Weavers of Bury St. Edmunds," 1477; Black, W. H., *Leathersellers*, p. 123, "Ordinances of the Pouchmakers," 1501; "Clothworkers' Ordinances," p. 26; Welch, *Pewterers*, II, 243; Fox, F. F., *Merchant Taylors of Bristol*, p. 61. Many other examples might be adduced.

³ *Munimenta, Gildhallae Lond.*, III, 442. *Liber Memorandorum*, "Ordinance of the Cordwainers," 1272; Coote, *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Historical Society*, IV (1871), 30; Sharpe, *Calendar of Letter-Books*, Letter Book E, p. 13; Hudson, and Tingey, *Records of Norwich*, I, 178; Kerry, in the *Antiquary*, XXIII, 28; Bickley, *Little Red Book of Bristol*, I, 38; *ibid.*, II, 87.

⁴ The first requirement of this sort which I have seen was one made by the Fullers of Northampton about the middle of the fifteenth century. Markham and Cox, *Records of Northampton*, I, 292; see also "Ordinances of the Weavers of Bury St. Edmunds," *Hist. MSS. Comm., Fourteenth Report*, VIII, 135.

⁵ "Clothworkers' Ordinances," p. 26, *Ordinances of 1531-32*.

must be a "hireman."¹ Rather more complicated examinations were laid down in the ordinances of the Barber-Surgeons and the Apothecaries,² examinations which must have done much toward changing the craft of "barbery" into the science of surgery, the art of the apothecaries into the science of medicine.

The difficulty of the examination must have varied greatly in different gilds, being probably rather a hard test in such crafts as the Apothecaries and Barber-Surgeons, the practice of whose arts required some skill, and rather a simple matter with the Fullers and other mechanical crafts. There can be no doubt that it must have done much toward holding the apprentice to a high standard of workmanship. Its efficacy, of course, varied with the standards of the individual gilds. It seems to me that in the case of the industrial arts the examination system would be more effective than examinations upon book-knowledge. The candidate required to make a pair of shoes before the craft masters must be possessed of real skill in his art in order to do well. Dexterity of hand cannot be "crammed." Thus the strength of the apprenticeship system was greatly increased by the gilds through their surveillance of the relations between master and apprentice and through their examination system.

Whatever may have been its weak points the mediaeval apprenticeship system is by no means to be despised; it was well adapted to the social and economic conditions of the time. The household, the small shop, and the gild were the great factors in industrial life. There was little capital, little machinery, no factory system, no great gulf between employer and employee. The apprentice became a part of his master's household and was given a home and instruction in a trade at but little expense save that of time. If the master did his duty, skill and artistic ability were developed in the lad. At the end of his term of service he passed into the

¹ Ferguson and Nanson, *Gilds of Carlisle*, pp. 179-80, "Shoemakers' Ordinances," 1595. The Bakers of York required that the apprentice, after completing his term, "shall at his first settinge up bake a batche of bread, and entreat the Searchers to come and se the same, whether it be well, lawfulllye and workmanlie wrought and done or no."—Smith, L.T., *Archaeological Review*, I, 222.

² Young, *Barber-Surgeons*, p. 310; Barrett, *History of the Apothecaries*, p. xxxiii.

ranks of the master craftsmen and looked forward to a life of comparative economic security and perhaps of some honor as a skilled artisan, merchant, or citizen. He might even hope to become Lord Mayor of London. If there was little opportunity for him to rise out of his class there was great opportunity for him to rise in it.

On the other hand the apprentice was an important asset to the master, giving him increasingly valuable aid in his craft work, attending to his customers, and performing irksome menial duties for the master, the master's wife, and other members of the household. Broadly speaking, the interests of master and man did not conflict, but were in large measure identical. Such a relationship grew from the fact that the household and the small shop were the foundations of industry.

Master and apprentice were held to their duty by the craft gild. By means of its general supervision, and especially by means of the examination system, the gild was able to see that a certain standard of workmanship was maintained. Towns were small, gild members few, concealment of bad conduct difficult, so that gild supervision could be made very effective.

We need not hesitate to affirm that the result of this system of apprenticeship was the development of well-wrought and even artistic productions. It can scarcely be denied that the superiority of the later Middle Ages and of the Renaissance over the early Middle Ages, in the field of the industrial arts, was due in some degree to the apprenticeship system. The system offered opportunity for the development of skill and artistic ability, and while it is true that not every apprentice took advantage of this opportunity, some apprentices did, and produced good work. On the whole, the institution met the needs of mediaeval and early modern times as a system of industrial education.

In a subsequent article it will be shown that the system of apprenticeship declined in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the result of changed social and economic conditions; and that the existence of some of these conditions today will operate to render a revival of the institution, an inadequate solution of the present problem of industrial education.